Declassified and Approved For Release 2012/01/24 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000201830058-8

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A18

NEW YORK TIMES
13 June 1986

Weighing the Espionage Damage

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 12 — Nearly all of those implicated in last year's spate of espionage cases in this country have now been convicted. But Government officials believe the damage caused by the spying is likely to linger for years, affecting anything from naval tactics to the United States' capability for gathering sensitive information about the Soviet military.

Among officials within the Reagan Administration and on Capitol Hill, there appears to be near-unanimous sentiment that the prosecutions were needed to deter other potential spies, even though some intelligence officials were discomforted by court testimony confirming and explaining the security breaches.

As analysts in various Government agencies assess the significance of the espionage cases, it is clear their work is more of an art than a science. Analysts have no way of conclusively learning how the Soviet Union, or any other adversary, puts stolen information to work. Further, the spies who are caught either do not cooperate after conviction or cannot remember exactly what they did.

All this makes calculating damage a matter of guesswork, based mostly on "worst case" scenarios that assume everything ever handled by a spy has been compromised and understood by the opposition.

Two Stand Out as Damaging

Officials say that with these methods, two of the espionage cases brought in the last year stand out as being the most significant, over the long term, to American interests: the loss suffered by the National Security Agency when a former employee, Ronald W. Pelton, sold secrets to the Soviet Union, and the nearly two decades of espionage by John A. Walker Jr., a Navy chief warrant officer.

American officials believe that Mr. Walker and his associates, including his son and his brother, gave the Soviet Union material needed to unscramble much of the United States Navy's secret communications for a period of years in the 1970's.

The implications of such a breach are enormous.

According to former senior Navy officials, the coded communications presumably available to the Soviet Union would include such sensitive information as reports on the capabilities and weaknesses of American weaponry, some of which will be part of the American arsenal into the 1990's. Messages sent through the satellite communications network would also reveal the inner workings of the Navy's command structure, illuminating such issues as how long it takes to make decisions.

With the interceptions made possible by Mr. Walker's disclosures, Soviet agents could learn much more from their routine surveillance of American training exercises. "What they're getting is the judgments of what worked and what didn't from the people who ran it," said one former high-ranking Navy official.

American officials speculate that the interceptions prompted major changes in Soviet tactics. After Mr. Walker's activities gave the Russians access to classified reports on the Navy's success in tracking Soviet submarines, for example, the Russians embarked on a major program aimed at producing a quieter sub.

Senior Navy officials have said that the service is investing as much as $100 million to replace the code machines compromised by Mr. Walker's activities. But officials cannot put a price tag on the insights Soviet military planners gained from the intercepted communications.

Mr. Pelton's case presents the opposite side of the coin. According to American officials, the former employee of the supersecret National Security Agency compromised an eavesdropping project that had yielded some of the same sort of military intelligence that Soviet agents were gleaning from their access to Navy communications.

One of the projects compromised by Mr. Pelton involved the use of a high-technology device for intercepting certain Soviet military communications through undersea cables. Testimony at Mr. Pelton's trial by a senior N.S.A. official referred obliquely to this, saying that it involved information that "gave us an insight into military forces, their relative sizes, their plans for maneuvers or training, and a considerable amount of information about their overall capabilities." This would include precise accounts of the travels of Soviet Union's fleet of nuclear-armed submarines, data that had helped the United States measure its success in tracking the vessels.

"You're talking about the family jewels, and there aren't too many of them," said one official.

Officials are reluctant to compare the significance of the cases. Some say that, on balance, the Walkers caused the more long-lasting harm to American interests because the breach allowed the Soviet Union virtually unlimited access to Navy communications, while Mr. Pelton caused the loss of a source whose range was limited, but highly valuable. Others say, however, that the damage to American intelligence by the Pelton case was the more severe because it cost this country a source of information that may never be replaced.

There seem to be few second thoughts about the decision to prosecute Mr. Pelton, which initially was questioned by some intelligence officials because it would involve public discussion of classified details about the National Security Agency. Officials say they believe the prosecution of spy suspects is an effective way to deter others and heighten public awareness. Officials note that some recent cases, such as the arrest of Jonathan Jay Pollard on charges of spying for Israel, have begun with tips from suspicious co-workers.

Stephen Trott, who heads the Justice Department's criminal division, said intelligence officials ultimately seemed pleased about the prosecutions. "Given the situation in which we find ourselves, which is something that is uncomfortable for everybody," he said, "we're happy with the way things have come out. The system has gotten damn good at coping with the problems of prosecuting spies."

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